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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KJUS ETRD OAS CO VE

SUBJECT: COLOMBIA REACTS PRUDENTLY BUT FIRMLY TO ALLEGED VENEZUELAN INCURSIONS

REF: BOGOTA 3011

CLASSIFIED BY: Wililam R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C/NF) Minister of Defense Silva told the Ambassador that an alleged January 27 Venezuelan overflight of Colombian airspace was a deliberate provocation and that he expected more such incidents. According to the GOC, a Venezuelan military helicopter crossed into the Colombian department of Arauca, overflew a Colombian Army base, and remained in Colombian airspace for about 20 minutes on January ¶27. In remarks to the press from Davos, Foreign Minister Bermudez demanded explanations from the GBRV and said the GOC would file a formal complaint with the OAS and then the UN if the GBRV did not provide an adequate reply. President Uribe publicly continued to urge a cautious and prudent response. Venezuelan officials denied the charge, but agreed to investigate. Separately, the GOC captured and deported a Venezuelan National Guard sergeant who crossed into Vichada department and fired his rifle. The repeated GBRV incursions increase the political pressure on the Colombian government to strengthen its air and border defenses. End Summary.

GOC REPORTS VENEZUELAN MILITARY

CROSSINGS, GBRV DENIES AND DOWNPLAYS

¶2. (U) The GOC alleged that a Venezuelan military helicopter entered the Colombian department of Arauca on the morning of January 27th and flew over the city of Arauca - including the headquarters of the Colombian Army's 18th Brigade - before returning to Venezuelan airspace near the city of El Amparo (Apure state). Minister of Defense (MOD) Gabriel Silva said he was "absolutely certain" the incursion had taken place and claimed the GOC had proof of the flight from both the Armed Forces and Colombian citizens. (NOTE: Several Colombian media outlets ran

interviews with Arauca residents discussing the flight. A long distance photo appeared in the press. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Separately, Sergeant Juan Vicente Gomez Martinez of the Venezuelan National Guard crossed into Puerto Carreno (Vichada) on January 28 and fired his rifle. No injuries were reported. Colombian media reported that Colombian Marines captured Gomez and turned him over to local prosecutors, who found no basis to prosecute him and deported him to Venezuelan authorities.

¶4. (SBU) The GOC sent the GBRV a strongly worded diplomatic note on January 28th advising that the GOC was "deeply worried" by the flight's "flagrant violation of national sovereignty," and that the GOC demanded an explanation. The letter also stressed that the Colombian military had acted prudently and responsibly by not reacting to the alleged incursion. GOC Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez also said the GOC would demand an explanation for the Gomez incident.

¶5. (U) GBRV Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro categorically denied any overflight had taken place (calling it a "Colombian false positive"), while Vice Minister of Defense Daniel Machado said the GBRV would investigate but suggested Colombian authorities had mistaken Venezuelan airspace for Colombian. Machado denied knowing any details of the Gomez incident, but said such small incidents were bound to occur along borders like that of Colombia and Venezuela.

GOC REACTS PRUDENTLY

BUT FIRMLY

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¶6. (U) Speaking from the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, President Uribe told reporters that he was sure the overflight had been an accident, and he urged his administration to react with total prudence. Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez followed Uribe's lead, stressing that the GOC was awaiting the official GBRV response, was committed to acting through diplomatic channels, and would lodge a formal complaint with the OAS and then the UN, if the GBRV reply failed to satisfy Colombian concerns.

¶7. (S/NF) MOD Silva was more forceful in his public reaction, saying he believed the flight was no accident. Silva was much more candid in a January 28 meeting with the Ambassador, saying that he saw the incursions as part of a pattern of increasing Venezuelan provocations. Silva added that he believed the GBRV helicopter pilot had been on a suicide mission and that he anticipates the next provocation will be a maritime border incursion by GBRV forces, probably in disputed waters of the Gulf of Venezuela. He confirmed that Colombian forces had standing orders not to fire unless fired upon.

¶8. (U) Congressman Santiago Castro, Vice President of the House, called the alleged overflight a provocative act of military aggression, and he demanded the GOC invest up to \$3 billion USD in anti-air defenses to protect Colombia from similar Venezuelan threats. Castro contended that Colombia should have the ability to react more strongly in the future, arguing that a calm reaction to the next Venezuelan violation of Colombian airspace would signal weakness, not prudence. Castro added that Colombia should not enter into an arms race with Venezuela, but opined that the defense

budget should be changed this year to make anti-air defenses a priority. He added that Congress would hold a classified session to discuss such security measures.

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